

GUILT IN WOMEN

BY Marjorie

Guilt feelings play a large part in keeping middle class American women in our place. We are encouraged to feel free of many of the traditional restrictions placed on women in most other cultures. We are rarely beaten or openly ordered around. Our liberal husbands usually help with child rearing and approve of our mildly creative efforts. (Until, that is, our creativity seriously interferes with our wifely functions).

Few women can be free from the pressures of the Ideal; the Proctor and Gamble Modern Woman. She's the sex fantasy of the soap men--you've seen her on television--beatiful, long legged, perfectly groomed, she smiles as she waxes her impeccable home, somehow managing to be soft, sexy and aquiescent all the while.

It's impossible to live up to this ideal, and those who come close can never believe it. There's always a new horizon of dirt to anxiously scour away, a new make-up that must be tried, a new diet to keep her young and sexy. With each little failure comes a little more fear and guilt.

We are so afraid of growing old and unlovely that it is a discourtesy to ask a woman her age. Aging is so disgusting that it's rude to talk about it. We'll buy almost anything that promises to keep nature from telling our horrid secret--that we're over twenty-five. Like an obsolescent Detroit car, our property value decreases with each year; you fear he may trade you in on a new model. But you feel guilty too. You are letting him down, you owe it to him to stay as lovely as the promise you were when you met.

We can't hold back the ^ucourse of nature, so we lie, with grease and paint and the excressenees of the queen bee. Does your husband cover his worry lines with foundation lotion? Or do they make his face more mature and interesting? Does he struggle into a tight girdle every morning so his paunch won't offend your sensibilities? No, he expects you to go on loving him when the flesh slackens and the vigor wanes.

Most women feel guilty, almost as if it were a virtue, about the way they keep house. A friend you haven't seen in ages rings your doorbell and your greeting may well be, "Excuse the mess, I haven't had a chance to clean up." No one else may notice and you probably wouldn't notice in someone else's house. The dust under the bureau nags at you, it becomes a moral question.

If you hire a cleaning woman you may find yourself acting very peculiarly. Either you scramble about cleaning up before she gets there, pretend to be frantically busy with something important while she is working, or you leave the house altogether. It's hard to push her when she's slow because she's doing your job and you know it.

Sometimes you wonder why it is your job, sometimes you'd rather be out earning the bread, spending your life with other people, making things happen. But you can't make the money he makes, even if you've taken the opportunity to train yourself. And you'd have to be so pushy and unfeminine. And you'd come home to a dirty house and hungry kids besides. Oh well, if you can just get the

place straightened out and the kids off to school, there's book you want to read, a dress to make, a picture to paint.

The women's magazines are always going on about how we should meet him serenely at the door, smiling, drink in hand. Never pounce on him with the daily disasters until his shoes are off and his dinner in his stomach. After a day with the kids and Mr. Clean, you should appear contented and attractive (change your dress, freshen your make-up) as if you had spent the day reading novels and sipping lemonade on the verandah. You must comfort him and support his flagging ego. How nice for him to know he chose so well and is able to provide you with the home that keeps you so happy. The house and the kids are spotless, as if by magic, in this fantasy. You listen to his troubles and they disappear in your soothing presence. You, of course, haven't a gripe in the world and are simply thrilled to serve his needs so completely.

Actually, you lost your mind over the washing machine during the morning, the baby has been screaming with colic for two months and you are sure that another after-noon of diarrhea will turn him into another battered baby statistic. I can remember feeling very guilty about not being cheerful when my husband returned from an ego-bruising day in the real world. Selfishly feeling my ego had been bruised in the unreal world in which I felt trapped, I threw the screeching baby at him as he came in and ran out the door. When I hit the street I cried, then I felt guilty, then I went home and changed the diapers.

If your husband had a job that concerned itself, just to start, with a crying infant, a semi-operable washing machine and eight pounds of crappy diapers, he'd quit. He'd just quit and feel nothing but relief. You'd be the first to encourage him. We all know men can't stand that sort of thing anyway. But we feel guilty for not smiling!

Lot's of women feel guilty about being sick. You can't be the total housewife/lover with a runny nose and a headache. Sooner or late most of us find out that if we are too weak to lift head from pillow, we can escape the role without guilt, at least temporarily. We're almost certain to pay for it later in unwashed dishes, etc..

Then of course, there's sex. Can you really afford to be honest about what you are feeling and what you want? Haven't you ever lied about having an orgasm? so you wouldn't hurt his feelings; so he wouldn't think you are (ugh) frigid; so he would stop trying to give you one? Or men are nice that way, they want to give us pleasure too--but why do we feel so pressured to respond every time? Sometimes our orgasm seems more important to them than it does to us.

If he thinks you're frigid he may go out with other women. That's excusable because there's nothing harder on a man than a frigid woman, we feel sorry for him. How come it's also him we feel sorry for if he's impotent? If you're a "real woman" you can lay down that mop, remove your trifling anxieties with your clothes, creep into bed and become a tigress. That's what you're supposed to be like. Maybe you really are inadequate--guilt and fear!

Some women want more sex than their husbands but are afraid to ask all the time. Once in a while he's flattered that he turns you on, but he must know in his heart that he's the aggressor. God forbid he should feel you are using him.

Our second most important job seems to be building and protecting the male ego. (Our first is buying a different type of soap for every cleaning job). We must also worry about the effects of every phase of life on our children's little souls. How do we cope with our own lack of ego strength?

We spend hours and quantities of money trying to keep ourselves young and lovely, hence lovable; the children clean and well mannered; the house immaculate; the table charming; we're smiling on the outside, bitching on the inside; we deny or invent sexual feelings; we become extremely dishonest so our man will feel his home is his castle and he is king. Then he will love us; without that love our right to exist is challenged.

We can't succeed, the standards we set are impossible. Most of us can't fit into the mold anyway. We become nervous and bitter, get headaches, nag, or go in for extra-marital affairs--all of which make us more fearful and guilty.

There is nothing wrong in pleasing and serving someone you love, or in giving another human support in this painful world, as long as the giving is not all on one side and comes freely and generously, not out of fear, as if you were paying dues.

If women considered themselves first class citizens, we could not always put other people's needs and feelings ahead of their own. Of course, we would have to take the responsibility for having our own achievements and not be content to live off the successes of our husbands and children. A lot of the time women spend making themselves seem more lovable to their man would be better spent making themselves more lovable to themselves. It's very frightening to have to decide so late in life that there is something else we want to be and to step out of line to try to achieve it. Many of us have never bothered to think about what we could do with our lives other than being good wives and mothers. We have surrendered the power over our destinies, our decisions are made for us. It's easier, sometimes, to swallow the restlessness and try to be a "good woman" than decide what it is we really want to do. We often cling to the guilt, better to be home and scrubbing than hassling in a frightening world. I know I have to learn about myself and what I can do with my life, but I have to paint the bathroom this week, it looks disgraceful. At this rate I may never have to learn who I am. It's more comfortable that way, but parsnips are comfortable.

Most of us never really liked or trusted other women. Many of our mothers were dissatisfied, nagging and domineering--a sign of their humanity breaking out of a mold in which they couldn't quite squeeze. We don't often ally ourselves with other women, we'd rather be "one of the boys." The men may let us feel like we're making it, but you know when the chips are down, you're just a woman. Not liking women, when you are, in fact, a woman, says something pathetic about your opinion of yourself.

So we're trying something new. We're getting together in small groups and talking freely, woman to woman. It's hard at first to let down the old barriers of distrust and competition, but it's worth it. We're discovering that most of our guilty secrets and private nightmares are shared by many of our sisters. We're

discovering that it isn't just our individual neurotic personalities that make us restless and unhappy, that we don't have to carry all that guilt around because the crimes are not entirely ours. We're finding that in our technological age it is unnecessary and unfair to assign work according to sex. We're finding that the stereotypes of women are just as ridiculous and injurious as the stereotypes of blacks. Some of us feel we'd make better engineers or soldiers than maintenance workers. Best of all, and scariest, we are discovering we have perfectly workable minds. They may be a bit rusty, but the machinery is there.

A relationship with a man may be enriching and beautiful, but it can never be a fulfilling life in itself. Trying to live that way wastes your mentality and causes dependencies it is hard for both people to bear. Women are beginning to see that they can be whole, interesting human beings all by themselves, without the permission or help of a man.

We're 53% of the population in this country. If we can open our heads and get it together, we can get together, support one another and change the things that hurt and intimidate us in the "real world" and in our own minds. We can get out of our unreal world and become meaningful in ways that women have never been allowed to be before.

Women's Liberation digs your humanity. Can you dig that?

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